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# Ken Dreyer: Dealing with abundance

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Just a few years into owning his first business in South Africa in the 1970s, Ken Dreyer felt he couldn't ignore parallels he saw in the country with Nazi Germany, which his parents had fled during the Holocaust.

So Dreyer made a decision: He wouldn't raise his children under apartheid. He sold his bathroom supply operation in 1977, moved his family to the United States and got a job in Boston.

Decades later, he's still here, serving as CEO of the Wakefield-based **Eliassen Group**, one of the largest IT staffing agencies in the area.

Dreyer, 64, has held a number of different roles in the local business community and affected the lives of countless people along the way, according to those who know him. His focus, they say, has always been on helping people to be their best. And he excels at it.

"Work is more than money to him. He cares about people," said Hiram Samel, owner of Boston-based rug manufacturer Merida Meridian, who spent several years in an executive peer group facilitated by Dreyer.

Harold Ebbighausen, president of Iron Mountain North America, said Dreyer is an expert at bringing a logical and calming thought process to any tough situation.

"'Always deal from a position of abundance, not scarcity' — that was a famous Ken quote," said Ebbighausen, who was a member of Dreyer's executive group. "A lot of people would say that they don't have enough of this, don't have enough of that. He'd turn and say, 'What do you have enough of?' Instead of looking at deficiencies, he looks at strengths."

Dreyer left his role chairing the peer group for TEC (now Vistage) in 2007 to become CEO of Eliassen Group. Mona Eliassen, founder and then-CEO of the company, had been a member of Dreyer's peer group, and said she had so much confidence in him that she asked him to head her company.

Since joining Eliassen Group, Dreyer has helped the firm expand its annual revenue to a projected \$100 million this year from \$70 million. While most staffing firms saw revenue declines of 20 percent to 30 percent during the downturn in 2009, Eliassen Group was down just 10 percent.

Dreyer grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa, the son of parents who were both bookkeepers. His father, Kurt, had been a court magistrate in Germany but couldn't practice in South Africa, so he spent most of his free time playing chess. A chess master, Kurt Dreyer twice won the South African chess championship.

Ken Dreyer earned his undergrad and MBA degrees in South Africa, worked a few jobs, then bought the bathroom supply business, which he ran for five years before heading to the United States.

His first job in the country was as an assistant to one of the partners of Westco Corp., a plumbing, heating and electrical supply wholesaler. When the partner died in 1981, Dreyer became president.

Many employees of the company were apprehensive at first. Not only was he fairly new to the business, he was also a foreigner and was younger than the managers of every one of the supply houses.

It would be the first of many times Dreyer would have to prove himself as a leader under difficult circumstances. At his next two roles — as president of an office furniture dealer (Business Interiors) and owner of an environmental consulting company (ESS) — many employees also didn't believe in him at first, he said. In fact, it was a similar reaction at Eliassen Group as well, Dreyer said.

"This challenge is similar everywhere I have been — 'You don't know our business, so how could you possibly be a leader?' " he said. "But I think not knowing something about the business actually catalyzes the learning process, because if you don't learn really quickly, you're not in such good shape."

His passion for people has been another key to overcoming those challenges, say those who know him. Dreyer is a "master" at motivating people without being domineering, Eliassen said.

Dreyer always makes a major effort at understanding how to work with each unique person, added Steven Wasser, CEO of Maynard-based Verne Q. Powell Flutes and another former member of Dreyer's executive peer group.



W. Marc Bemsau

Ken Dreyer moved to the United States from South Africa in the 1970s because he did not want to raise his family under apartheid.

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Dreyer said he's developed his understanding of people in no small part through reading — lots of reading. He says he's completed a book just about every week since he was young, including approximately 250 books about or by Winston Churchill. Dreyer is "kind of like an encyclopedia. He has an amazing memory," Eliassen said.

The reading about history has also reinforced Dreyer's notion that long-term thinking is a must, despite the day-to-day and quarter-to-quarter nature of business in the U.S. "The world is not run quarter-by-quarter," he said.

While business was down last year, for instance, Eliassen Group hired a dozen people to better position the company when the economy recovered, Dreyer said. He also worked to expand the company's non-staffing division, eClinical Solutions, which manages data in clinical trials for pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical device companies.

Dreyer has two sons and lives in Newton with his wife of 41 years, Hazel. Outside of work he loves to exercise, golf and travel.

In all of his roles, Dreyer said, he's tried to emphasize one thing above all else: helping the people he works with to love what they do.

"Having people who are vibrant," he said, "is the single biggest predictor of success for a company."

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